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very beautiful, low liliaceous plant with grassy foliage and crocus-like flowers, which now begins to whiten the hill-sides nearest the plains. Its name is *Calochortus venustus*, and it deserves its name, which, equally for the species and the genus, refers to its beauty.

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## PRAIRIE FIRES.

BY DR. C. A. WHITE.

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EVERY dweller in the great interior region of North America, is more or less familiar with prairie fires, or rather, they have often at nightfall seen their lurid light in the distant horizon, or by day their huge volumes of smoke rising and blending with the clouds, and many are even familiar with the consuming march of the flames themselves. Strangers visiting these regions, between October and May, are often alarmed at the first sight of these illuminations, being impressed with the belief that they emanate from burning buildings.

Usually, these fires are harmless, but there is always danger that they will cause destruction of property, and even of life, and the settler in sparsely inhabited districts watches with anxiety until the almost inevitable annual scourge has swept all the uncultivated prairie in his neighborhood. The greater part of the combustible material which feeds these fires is grass, the remainder being the dried remains of those annual plants so well described by Mr. J. A. Allen, in the *NATURALIST* for December, 1870. These together cover the ground every season, for the fires of one year do not at all impair or prevent their abundant growth the next. Stringent laws are enacted in all the prairie states, against the setting of fires to the prairies, yet each year's growth of grass upon at least the larger ones, is somehow almost invariably burnt. The progress of the fire is usually slow, and is often arrested by a few furrows plowed around the field for that purpose, by small rills or even by a slightly beaten road. But when the wind is high upon the great prairies, the case is very different. Then nothing can withstand the fury of the fire, and it often runs an unchecked course of more than a hundred miles, sometimes leaping rivers of more than a

dozen rods in width, since their valley sides are often grassy down to the water's edge. In such cases, woe to the traveller who may be unprepared for, or may lack nerve to meet the emergency. If he has a box of matches and ordinary coolness of judgment he is in no personal danger, for he has only to stop and set another fire, extinguish that part of it upon the windward side before it has increased beyond his control, and pass into the space that has been burnt free from grass by his own fire, where he is safe from the advancing flames that have given him the alarm. Some danger, however, always remains that his animals may take alarm from his own fire, and become unmanageable, but usually their instinctive dread, and a sense of dependence upon their masters, which horses constantly feel and manifest upon those lonely journeys, render them usually quite tractable under such circumstances.

While prosecuting the Geological survey of Iowa, we were often exposed to danger from fires when having occasion to cross the broad prairie region of the western part of the state. One October day after the first frosts of the season had killed the herbage, and the subsequent warm days had rendered the prairies almost like one vast tinder-box, the approach of night found us a few miles from a stream, the valley of which was distinctly in view as well as the broad prairie stretching beyond it. Mosquitoes are abundant in the valleys at this time of the year, and being apparently conscious that their end is approaching, they seem determined to get the greatest amount of blood in the shortest possible time from every living thing that comes in their way. We, therefore, stopped as usual, upon elevated ground, to camp where the breeze would prevent their visit. Procuring water for the camp, and watering our horses at a rill near by, we pitched our tent where we could overlook the surrounding country, and mowed the grass from a space of a few square yards upon which to build our camp fire of the few sticks we had brought from our last camping ground. Our supper over, and the horses picketed upon the grass that was still fresh by the rill, we lay down to sleep. The wind had been high all day, and did not abate upon the approach of night as it usually does. As it began to grow dark, I had observed in the distant horizon the light of a prairie fire. It was directly to the windward, and the face of the country in that direction was known to be such that nothing would be likely to arrest its progress towards us, except the stream before mentioned, and this I feared was too narrow

for that purpose in so high a wind. An hour was passed nervously watching the progress of the light and listening to the moaning of the wind, as it roughly swept the newly frost-killed grass. At last I could distinctly see the fire making its way down to the stream upon the further valley side; then for a time its light seemed to be gone, and I hoped its progress had been stayed by the water of the stream, but in a few moments more it had gained the top of the hither valley side. No time was now to be lost, so quickly arousing my companions, and bidding them follow me with their blankets, I seized a brand from the camp-fire and running a few rods to the leeward, a moment sufficed us to start a new fire from our camp, its progress towards it (for it will sometimes work its way slowly against the wind) being arrested by the beating of our blankets. One man then leading the horses into the burnt space, we followed, dragging tent, bedding, harness and camp-chest; then seizing the wagon, which was fortunately upon inclining ground, we rolled it safely in by the light of the fire we had kindled and also of that which was fast approaching us. Scarcely had we secured the last article and passed within the charmed circle, when the dense flames, leaping high in the air and rolling like surf upon the sea-shore, gathered around us, and enveloped us with their hot and suffocating smoke. We all, horses and men, stood there motionless; conscious of our safety it is true, but with an instinctive feeling of terror at the danger we had escaped. We were upon a hollow island in a sea of fire. A moment more, and it was a peninsula, for the advancing fire-flood parted around us; and then we were left in the darkness, intensified by the blackness of the charred earth, while the flames swept on over the distant prairie, like a troop of flying fiends.

Gathering our scattered equipage together, we lay down again for the night, with no regret except that our faithful horses could not have their accustomed grazing. Next morning found us in the midst of a dreary blackened waste, not "without the smell of fire upon our garments," but we were free from similar danger until we should reach a region of unburnt prairie.